



Discourse & Society

Revisiting the Gulf of Tonkin Crisis: An Analysis of the Private Communication of President Johnson and his Advisers

Moya Ann Ball

First Published July 1, 1991 | research-article



Abstract

This essay explains how the rhetorical response of President Johnson and his advisers to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964 provides a paradigm case of how a confusing set of events can be given interpretation and structure by means of dramatizing communication. Although the Tonkin events were largely unsubstantiated, narratives were shared in which a hostile enemy had deliberately attacked American vessels on routine patrols. Consequently, American prestige and power were being tested before the world. The confusing events, therefore, were lined up into a more familiar story which then became the justification for further action. The dramatizations swept through private decision-making groups and into the legislative and administrative branches of government resulting in the passage of a congressional resolution. This resolution was the legal weapon needed to expand greatly American involvement in the Vietnam War.

Ball, G. (23 June 1965) Memorandum to the President, Vol. 10, Box 3, Aides File—Bundy, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Ball, G. (1982) *The Past Has Another Pattern*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Ball, M.A. (1988) 'A Descriptive and Interpretive Analysis of the Small Group Communication of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and their Key Advisers Concerning the Decisions from January 1961 to July 1965 to Expand the Vietnam War', PhD dissertation, University of Minnesota.

Berman, L. (1982) *Planning a Tragedy*. New York: W. W. Norton.

Blumler, J.G. , Dayan, D. and Wolton, D. (1990) 'West European Perspectives on Political



Quarterly Journal of Speech 58: 396-407. [Google Scholar](#)

Bormann, E.G. (1982) 'Fantasy and Rhetorical Visions: Ten Years Later', Quarterly Journal of Speech 68: 288-305. [Google Scholar](#)

Bundy, M. (22 May 1964) Memorandum to the President, Box 1, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Bundy, M. (25 May 1964) Memorandum to the President, Box 19, Aides File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Bundy, M. (24 June 1964) Memorandum to the President, Box 2, Aides File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Bundy, M. (24 July 1964) Memorandum to the President, Box 2, Aides File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Bundy, M. (31 August 1964) Memorandum to the President, Box 2, Aides File, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Bundy, M. (6 October 1964). Memorandum to the President, Box 2, Aides File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Bundy, M. (4 January 1965) Memorandum to the President, Box 2, Aides File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Burke, Kenneth (1966) Language as Symbolic Action, p. 46. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Cable (2 August 1964) 'DeSota Patrol SITREP NR 8', Box 227, Countries— Vietnam, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Cater, D. (23 May 1964) Memorandum to McGeorge Bundy, Box 7, McNaughton Files, Papers of Paul C. Warnke, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Cherwitz, R. (1978) 'Lyndon Johnson and the "Crisis" of Tonkin Gulf: A President's Justification of War', Western Journal of Speech Communication 93-104. [Google Scholar](#)

Cherwitz, R. (1980) 'Masking Inconsistency: The Tonkin Gulf Crisis', Communication Quarterly 28: 27-37. [Google Scholar](#)

Chronology of Tonkin Event (4-5 August 1964) Rough Draft, Box 228-9, Countries—Vietnam, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Clifford, C. (7 August 1969) Oral History Interview by Joe B. Frantz, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Department of State Administrative History (n.d.) Vol. I, Ch. 8. Lyndon B. Johnson Library.



Dreyfus, H.L. and Rabinow, P. (1983) Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics, p. 186. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Forrestal, M. (3 March 1964) Memorandum to McGeorge Bundy, Box 3, Name File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Forrestal, M. (3 November 1969) Oral History Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Fulbright, Senator (6-7 August 1964) 'Senator Fulbright's Statements', Box 76-7, Countries—Vietnam, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Geertz, C. (1973) The Interpretation of Cultures. New York: Basic Books.

Gibbons, W.C. (1986) The United States Government and the Vietnam War Part II 1961-1964. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ivie, R.L. (1974) 'Presidential Motives for War', Quarterly Journal of Speech 60: 337-345. [Google Scholar](#)

Ivie, R.L. (1980) 'Images of Savagery in American Justifications of War', Communication Monographs 47: 279-294. [Google Scholar](#)

Johnson, L.B. (1970) Transcript, CBS News Special, 'LBJ: The Decision to Halt the Bombing', Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Kahin, G.M. (1986) Intervention. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.

Karnow, S. (1983) Vietnam: A History. New York: The Viking Press.

Leadership Meeting Notes (4 August 1964) Box 1, Meeting Notes File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

McNamara, R. and Sharp, Admiral (August 1964) Transcript of Telephone Conversation, Box 228-9, Countries—Vietnam, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

McNamara, R. (5 August 1964) Transcript of News Conference, Box 38, National Security Council History, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Memorandum for Bundy (4 August 1964) Box 227, Countries—Vietnam, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Memorandum for the President (25 February 1964) Unsigned, Box 2, Roger Hilsman Papers, John F. Kennedy Library.

Memorandum for the Record (4 April 1964) Box 30-3, Agency File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.



NSAM (National Security Action Memorandum) No. 314 (10 September 1964) Sent to Secretary of Defense and Secretary of State, Box 1-9, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Pettigrew, A. (1985) 'On Studying Organizational Cultures', in John Van Maanen (ed.) *Qualitative Methodology*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Pratt, J.W. (1970) 'An Analysis of Three Crisis Speeches', *Western Speech* 194-203. [Google Scholar](#)

'Presidential Decisions' (n.d.) National Security Council History—Gulf of Tonkin, Box 38, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Read, B. (March 1970) Oral History Interview by Paige E. Mulhollan, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Rostow, W. (29 March 1961) Memorandum to the President, Box 64A. Staff Memoranda, President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy Library.

Rostow, W. (21 April 1961) Memorandum to the President, Box 64A, Staff Memoranda, President's Office Files, John F. Kennedy Library.

Rostow, W. (11 June 1964) Memorandum to William Bundy, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Stockdale, J.B. (7 October 1984) *The Washington Post*. [Google Scholar](#)

Summary Notes of 537th National Security Council Meeting (4 August 1964, 12.35 p.m.) Box 1, Meetings File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Summary Notes of 538th National Security Council Meeting (4 August 1964 6.15 p.m.) Box 1, Meetings File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

Summary Notes of 541st National Security Council Meeting (25 August 1964, 12.35 p.m.) Box 1, Meetings File, NSF, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

'The Phantom Battle that Led to War' (23 July 1984) *U.S. News and World Report* 56-67.

Weiss, S. (9 April 1964) Memorandum for the Record, Box 30-33, Agency File NSF, LBJ Library.

Windt, T. (1987) 'The Presidency and Speeches on International Crises: Repeating the Rhetorical Past' in T. Windt and B. Ingold (eds) *Essays in Presidential Rhetoric*, 2nd edn. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

**SAGE Knowledge**

The ultimate social sciences library

SAGE Research Methods

The ultimate methods library

SAGE Stats

Data on Demand

CQ Library

American political resources

**SAGE
Journals**[About](#)[Privacy Policy](#)[Terms of Use](#)[Contact Us](#)[Help](#)**Browse**[Health Sciences](#)[Life Sciences](#)[Engineering &](#)[Materials Science](#)[Social Sciences &](#)[Humanities](#)[Journals A-Z](#)**Resources**[Authors](#)[Editors](#)[Reviewers](#)[Librarians](#)[Researchers](#)[Societies](#)**Opportunities
Discourse &
Society**[Advertising](#)[Reprints](#)[Content](#)[Sponsorships](#)[Permissions](#)

ISSN: 0957-9265

Online ISSN: 1460-3624

Copyright © 2017 by SAGE Publications

